A

SERMON,

ON OCCASION OF

THE LATE FIRE,

IN THE

CITY OF NEW YORK.

(Published by Request.)

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SERMON.

"All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: the grass withereth, the flower fadeth; because the Spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it; surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth, but the word of our God shall stand for ever."—Isaiah xl. 6, 7, 8.

This is the language which I address to you, my brethren, on the unprecedented calamity of the past week; unprecedented, certainly, in this country. It has been compared with similar events in history; but as we cannot desire to exaggerate the evil which has befallen us, it may be proper here to state how entirely it falls short of those calamitous visitations of Providence. The four hundred streets, thirteen thousand houses, and eighty-nine churches of London, which were burnt in 1666, and the seventeen, almost eighteen thousand buildings burnt in Moscow, in 1812, left but a small portion of those cities remaining. The conflagration here has left us still a vigorous and wealthy city, with a spring of courage and elasticity strong enough to sustain it. Still it is a calamity from which, doubtless, it will take the city several years to recover itself; and it is a calamity, too, which does not press upon the ostensible and immediate sufferers alone, but which must be felt, more or less, by every citizen among us. At such a time, I think it is proper that our meditations in the sanctuary should bear some express reference to what is occupying so many minds, and is of such wide-spread and permanent consequence.

For this purpose I have chosen a passage of Scripture, which reminds us of man's frailty, and of God's power; of the uncertainty of worldly possessions, and of the value of those only possessions which are certain. "The voice said"—thus is our text introduced, "The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: The grass withereth, the flower fadeth; because the Spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it; surely the people is grass." This is the language of admonition; a sound of lamentation is in our ears. But suddenly the tone changes to encouragement and confidence: "The grass does, indeed, wither, the flower fades—let it wither, let it fade; but the word of our God shall stand for ever." All is not lost, though all things earthly were lost; "the word of our God shall stand forever."

Let us, then, meditate upon topics that are accordant with these words, and with the occasion that has suggested them.

I. And first, as we most appropriately may—upon the impotence of man and the omnipotence of God.

It has been often said that man is the lord of this lower creation; that he holds empire over nature. In this age, which has, doubtless with some degree of propriety, been called "the age of machinery," such assumptions are likely to occupy a large space in men's thoughts; and they are in danger of forgetting, in the signal success of their inventions and devices, how impotent, after all, they really are. We hear but too much, I am afraid, or at least too much in the tone of boasting, of man's wonderful control over the elements—how that he has learned to stretch forth his mysterious wand

of power over the sea; how he has lifted his pointed sceptre to the heavens, and disarmed the lightning, and caused its fiery bolt to fall harmless at his feet; how, in fine, he has conquered nature, and compelled its mightiest agents, fire, water, air, earth, to do his bidding.

Now, there is one aspect of nature, which, in this view, deserves to fix our attention. There is a point in nature to which our control extends—beyond which it ceases. And I believe that in this, as in every thing else, the material world is designed to answer moral ends. We have control up to a certain point, in order that our ingenuity may be called forth, our faculties exercised, and society improved—beyond that point our control ceases, that we may not be suffered to forget the sovereignty and omnipotence of God. It is with every element of nature, in this respect, as it is with every department of knowledge. Both lead us soon to find our limit, and then sublimely point us to the unknown and the infinite that lie beyond it. Both task our faculties and encourage us with success, to a certain extent, and then admonish us of greater things still, never to be achieved. Both tend, therefore, to make us humble, and, at the same time, to lift our thoughts to things above us.

So wise and lofty is the moral intent of the system of nature. Thus what is most familiar to our use and experience, becomes the teacher of sublime truths. That familiarity is not allowed to degenerate into impious levity. Man is made to feel that he is still surrounded with God's omnipotence. I have heard from the thoughtless, the language of that impious levity: but I have also seen it fearfully checked. I have heard

the rude sailor, when he bade "the winds blow," as he clung to the giddy mast; I have heard the reckless traveller, when he almost railed against inclement skies, forgetting whose ministers they are; but, under more awful visitations of the elements, I have seen the boldest, trembling and prostrate, with more than the fear of childhood.

Nature, then, though in its milder moods it is subject to a certain control, is commissioned also, to teach man other lessons than those of self-confidence. When the ocean-storm crosses not his path, he proudly steers his vessel across the deep, and it obeys him—"as a steed that knows its rider;" the mighty ship, which treads the waves beneath it, and leaps from one ocean-chasm to another, he seems to hold, as it were, in his very hand. But let the storm come in its fury, and he finds that one wave can overwhelm him; that he offers his breast to a power—nay, that he offers the ribbed bows of his ship to a power, that no more regards him, than it does the frailest shell on the shore. When the skies are calm and serene, man's peace is strong within him; yes, and amidst the ordinary agitations of the elements, he can feel security; but I have marked—and with me it was a moral reflection—I have marked, that every now and then, there comes a storm which seems to bear, in its blackening bosom, other messages; which makes man feel, that the wing of the tempest may sweep him away, or that one lightning-flash may blast and consume him in a moment. We are not left to imagine that our lordship over the creation shall own no superior Lord. The elements that are in most familiar use, will sometimes show us, how completely they are

beyond our power. That element which it is our special boast in modern times, that we have caged and confined, and compelled to work for us in its dark prison-hold—how often does it break forth and spread horror and death through our floating palaces. The flame that burns upon your hearth—I need not tell you, with the spectacle that has lately been before your eyes, *what* it may do. Who that saw the fiery spirit of destruction let loose among yonder warehouses—who that saw and heard that roaring deluge of flame which swept through the chambers of wealth and commerce, did not feel the impotence of the proudest men or communities, when waging war with the powers of nature?

And the mightiest agents of nature, too, like the God whom alone they obey, are no respecters of persons. The strong and the weak alike bow before them. The high and the low alike tremble in their presence. Nature knows nothing of favouritism; and when her dread ministers come forth to do her bidding, they respect as little the marble palace or the granite warehouse, as the meanest hovel of poverty. Elsewhere may be found compliments and flatteries; but the awful words in which nature finds utterance, the roaring of flood, or storm, or fire, the thunder's tone, the earthquake's voice, is softened to no phrases of adulation. It speaks—and human hearts quail beneath it;—be they clothed with ermine, or clothed in rags, be they girt with stars and orders of nobility, or bound around with the hermit's girdle, they quail beneath it. It speaks—and what does it say? "All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field; the grass withereth, the flower fadeth; be-

cause the Spirit of the Lord, the wind of heaven, bloweth upon it; surely the people is grass."

But I spoke not only of man's impotence, but of God's omnipotence. We have witnessed what we call, and justly call, an awful conflagration. But the element which has spread its ravages over a fair portion of our city, has revealed but little of what God has committed to its tremendous energies; "the hiding of his power" is more awful than its manifestation. It has laid but a small section of one of the five hundred cities of the world, in ruins. "Lo! these are parts of his ways; but how little a portion is heard of him—but the thunder of his power, who can understand." "Before him," says the sublime prophet Habakkuk, "before him went the pestilence, and burning coals went forth at his feet; the everlasting mountains were scattered; and the perpetual hills did bow." And we read of a time, when the world itself shall be on fire, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat. And we have lately seen in the heavens a body, which, in a former revolution, as we are told, glowed with a heat sufficient to consume the world with its breath. And yet that was but a meteor of the evening sky, compared with the eternal fires of the ten thousand times ten thousand suns and systems, that light up the infinite regions of day! What, then, shall we say—what shall we think, of God's omnipotence? "God hath spoken once; twice have I heard this; that POWER belongeth unto God!"

I have spoken of man's impotence. But let us not forget, that there are respects in which he has strength—a strength far beyond what is given to his body—far beyond what is given to his mere intellect. It is in

moral strength that man comes nearest to a victory over nature. His flesh is weak. "The grass withereth." But there is a "word of God," a power of God, in the soul, that "shall stand." His flesh is weak; but his spirit may be strong. Nay, such is the power of the moral will, that it often imparts amazing strength even to the weak flesh. It makes those sinews and nerves, which are all sensitive and alive to suffering, strong to endure as brass or marble. The Indian singing his war-song amidst the most excruciating tortures; the martyr preserving his heavenly calmness and lifting his eye of triumph to heaven, when the flames kindle around him; and he too, who, with a steady eye and an unbroken courage, can behold the destruction of that property which he has toiled years to accumulate—each of these presents instances of power in the mind, that can rise superior to poverty, to pain, and death. Though man, then, is weak, yet has he strength; and though poor, yet may he have possessions.

II. And this leads me to the second observation I intended to make—which is, on the uncertainty of all earthly possessions, and the value of the only possessions that *are* certain. "The grass withereth, the flower fadeth; but the word of our God shall stand forever."

There is nothing on which men generally lay their hand with a grasp so eager, or with a reliance so certain, as on property. Property is, in this world, the grand, ostensible, universal form of power. It is a power applicable to almost all human purposes; since the ends of virtue, learning, ambition and pleasure, may be alike gained by it. There are other forms of power indeed, and especially the social and political. But political power must be confined to a few; and social power,

though universal, is not so palpable in its influence, or obvious in its advantages. Meanwhile, property stands forth, a power within the reach of all, level to the comprehension of all. It draws attention; it surrounds itself with splendour, or at the least, with comfort; and yet more, it is, or is conceived to be, independence. But above all, it is a fixed, permanent, tangible good. It is something which a man can see, weigh, and definitely estimate; it is something which he can leave behind him for his children. Health too, I know, reputation, influence, are advantages; but they are comparatively vague, uncertain, and unsubstantial. The one dwells in a certain state of the nerves and sensations—you cannot see it; another has its being in the fleeting, changing breath of the multitude—you cannot make any exact account of it; and the other, social influence, is felt—where, and how? Why it is felt but in the kindly greeting, in the grasp of the hand or the glance of the eye. "Let me have," is the feeling of multitudes, though they may not so express it—"let me have that which has weight and substance to recommend it; something that will stay by me, though health and reputation and friends forsake me; something that I can transmit to my children as a sure and fast inheritance." This, I say, is the worldly feeling; and I do not, by any means say, that the worldly feeling, but for the excess to which it goes, is to be condemned.

But I ask, if it does not overrate, not the importance merely, but the certainty of this possession. I ask, not whether that, upon which you lay your hand so securely, can buoy and bear you up and make you content and happy—for I know, and you, in your sober thoughts, know that it cannot; but I ask, whether it possesses

that quality of being peculiarly substantial and permanent, which you imagine. Yonder massive warehouses —where are they now? Vanished, with many a solid bale of merchandise—vanished, like an exhalation of the night. In the morning you looked for them, and lo! a blackened and unsightly heap of ruins! The ample estate, so deliberately devised and with the strong bond of the last will—could that bond hold it fast, could its seals protect their trust, from the dissolving flame? The property, thought to be so securely invested in incorporated companies—the little all of hundreds—what are its certificates now, but so much waste paper? And this indeed is the severest part of the late calamity. There are, I fear, many retired individuals—professional men perhaps, scholars, females, widows and orphans—persons of moderate property and small incomes, who have, in one night, lost their sole reliance. It is comparatively a small thing, I am tempted to say, that active and enterprising men—men of business and resource, should have lost a part of their capital, or all of it; they know how to repair the loss. They have health, and energy, and courage. But those of whom I speak, are, some of them, sick; some aged; and many are of the weaker sex—entitled to every degree of consideration from a generous, liberal, and wealthy community, and the more entitled to it, because they cannot come into the throng of men, to plead their own cause. I wish that the case of such might, at a proper time, be commended to the public attention. If I might consult my own feelings, I should say that there ought, in a country like this, overflowing with wealth, to be a noble subscription in their behalf. This is conformable to the usage of every civilized community, in cases of

extraordinary calamity, and if it is not conformed to, in this instance, it will only be, because the sufferers cannot put their case with all its aggravations before the public eye—because they sit apart, in silence, and alone. Indeed, this is a case, a case of common exposure to wide-spread calamity too, where, in some instances, the rich will be compensated at the expense, and to the ruin of poor men and poor women, the holders of the fatal stocks. It is as if amidst a shower of fire from heaven, the roofs were taken from a hundred poor dwellings to spread a shield of protection over a few splendid palaces. Nor can it be believed, when all this comes to be considered as it must be, that something will not go from those splendid palaces, to kindle the fire again on many a cold hearth, where, I doubt not, bitter tears have fallen, in silence, in loneliness, and despair.

But, not to dwell any longer on this, at present, for the time has not come yet to urge this appeal—what a tremendous lesson have we received upon the insecurity of property! I feel that this is a subject which comes home to every one of us. The uncertainty of business is proverbial; but the insecurity of investments is made, by the late calamity, scarcely less striking. What form of possession is there that human ingenuity can devise, what kind of bond or stock is there, which either storm, or fire, or pestilence, or war, may not break up, and scatter to the winds?

In such circumstances—certain of nothing—certain neither of health, nor reputation, nor friends—certain not even of that of which we are most certain—how strongly is commended to us the divinely-taught wisdom of making a provision for ourselves, that is beyond the

reach of all earthly vicissitude! "Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth, where the moth doth corrupt, and thieves break through and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal."

And, my brethren, the lesson which is here inculcated by the great Teacher—which is so powerfully commended to us by the late awful visitation of Providence—is doubtless one which greatly needs to be enforced among us. I do not speak, nor think of that visitation as a special judgment. It is embraced, in my view of it, among those general means, by which God is ever teaching us that the great end of life is one that lies far beyond and above all earthly comforts, possessions and splendours. It is this, I say, that we are taught, and need to be taught. We are, in a life of business, surrounded by fearful exposures; and especially, ought I not to say, in this very city, whose prosperity has been invaded by such a sudden and awful calamity. I speak of this city, no otherwise, than as a scene of such active and engrossing business, as hardly has its parallel in the world. I say, that in such circumstances, and on such a theatre, there is a severe and solemn trial of human virtue. From this pulpit you would expect me to say no less; but I would to God that it were not regarded as the mere language of the pulpit. I say that this is a trial which touches the essential point of all human welfare. And I fear that many are falling in this momentous probation; that many are losing sight of things infinitely dearer than wealth—that they are losing sight of the immortal, in the mortal—of "durable riches," in perishing riches—of the

soul, in sense—of God, in the world—the very world that he has made to reveal him! I speak to you, my brethren, but as I would speak to myself in the same circumstances. I say, there is danger. That whelming flame carried no alarm to my mind so awful, because it conveyed danger to no interests so momentous, as those which are put in peril—I will dare to say it—by the prosperous business of every day! Think me not extravagant, till you can prove to me that the eager strife of business is not rendering hundreds, and thousands more indifferent to their souls' welfare, than they are to the smallest items of their daily-accumulating gains. Think me not extravagant, till you can prove to me that that scene of business which God designed to be a field for the noblest virtues, is not making many among us, selfish, covetous, and possibly dishonest. To whom this may appertain I know not; but this I say:—if you are a man whose god is gold, and whose life is one lengthened service and slavery to that god; if your mind as well as your body is bowed down to worship it; if you pay it the homage of all your chief hopes and wishes and anxieties, and are sacrificing mind, memory, reason, conscience, religion, every thing, at its altar; if you are garnering up the dear treasure in your secret thoughts, and brooding sweetly over it, as you never brood even over the thoughts of heaven; if you are growing proud, not grateful, as you are growing rich, and are learning, by an almost unconscious process, to feel as if you were independent of man and of God alike—then, I say, it was time that you were taught, by a visitation as solemn and admonitory as that which has laid a part of your city in ashes. Better that the property of half of the country were con-

sumed by fire, than that a spirit, fierce for gain, and reckless of every thing else, should burn with more fatal fires, in ten thousand families among us. Wealth is *not* the chief good—must we gravely say so? Is this a country that deserves to be addressed, with the irony implied in such a declaration? Wealth, in fact, is not so great a good as the energy that obtains it. A man is not so fortunate in the possession of millions, as he was in the activity, industry and talent that enabled him to acquire them. Wealth is valuable, doubtless; but its value is contingent—it depends on what has a far higher value, the intelligence, liberality, and purity of the mind. It takes its whole character from the mind of its possessor. To the excellent man it will be an excellent thing; to the mean man it will be a mean thing; to the corrupt man it will be a fountain of corruption, a minister of evil. Wealth is not an end, but a means. It is good, only in a good use. It is good for nothing, in no use; and it possesses a far worse character than that, in a bad use. Like the element of heat, it may spread around a genial warmth, and rear up fair and beautiful productions, or it may be the raging fire of evil passions, in which the soul is either hardened, or destroyed. Yes, wealth has, indeed, this high and fearful attribute—that it may be to a man one of the greatest of his blessings, or one of the greatest of curses.

For, as I walked through your city, I saw a man of a haughty brow and a hard heart, and of an iron hand, whom wealth had made a covetous man and an oppressor; whose spirit gain had immured in the close and grated prison of all-absorbing and indurating selfishness; and I said as I looked upon him, "I would rather be

the poorest man in this city, with a generous heart, than to be that man."

Again, I saw one whom a fair and envied inheritance had made rich—a young man, whose father had spent the toilsome and anxious years of a life, to launch him out upon a sea of fortune; and I saw the ample means of indulgence, and the absence of all honourable occupation, leading him step by step, till every virtue of his youthful heart was tainted to the core, and every promise of his early day was levelled in the dust, and he was left a wreck of life, upon the verge of an early grave—an object as loathsome and piteous to behold, as the tenant of the vilest hovel of poverty, and disease, and vice: and as I saw this, I meditated much with myself, and I said, "*Are* ample fortune and lavish expenditure a wise discipline for youth?—*should* a prudent and industrious father be mainly anxious to provide such a lot for his son?"—and I looked with a serious and distrustful eye, upon those immense accumulations of property, that draw the admiring gaze of the world.

But again I went forth, and another man I saw, and he too was opulent; but I saw that he grew modest, not proud, and beneficent, not voluptuous, with his increasing wealth. I saw, too, that in the midst of all the splendours and comforts of ample fortune, he bowed in humble gratitude before the great Giver of all blessings; and I saw, too, that his abundance flowed forth in many streams of beneficence to the world around him; that he was the poor man's friend, and the young man's patron and adviser, and the generous protector of his kindred, and the liberal fosterer of science and learning, and the noble helper of many charities; and then it

seemed to me that wealth was a good and beautiful thing—a blessed stewardship in the service of God, and a divine manifestation of mercy to man.

Again I looked upon this man, and I saw him fallen from that fair estate, and stripped of all the splendours of fortune; and I looked to see him broken and fallen in spirit: but no; he met me with a cheerful countenance; and what did he say? "I have lost that which I valued; but think not, my friend, that I have lost what I most value---the trust and peace of my own mind. I pretend to no cynical indifference; I am a dweller upon earth, and earth's possessions were useful to me, and I meant to make them useful to others; but I do not forget that I am a traveller to eternity. The flood of calamities which it pleased God that I should pass through—truly it has swept away from me some fair appendages, some rich wardrobes, some goodly equipages of my journey; but like those Eastern merchants, who sometimes, in a perilous journey, bore, secreted upon their persons, their whole fortune in one precious diamond, and thus preserved it, so do I feel that the calamities I have passed through, have left untouched my chief treasure." And when I saw this—when I heard this, I felt no longer that I looked upon a rich man, or upon a poor man; but I felt that I looked upon a MAN! I saw that the word of God's promise was true: "The grass withereth, the flower fadeth; but the word of our God shall stand for ever."

NOTE.

Within the few days that have elapsed since the foregoing Discourse was written, we have already began to see how much good may spring from a calamity so great, that, for a while, it left us no thought of any thing but the calamity.

The energy and courage of our citizens—the fraternal feelings called forth among us—the prevailing disposition to consider and help one another, is one delightful feature in this view of the compensatory system of a kind Providence.

The widely-extended sympathy of the community is another. Foremost in the expression of this sympathy, are the Philadelphia Resolutions. I can tell those true brethren, that they have touched many hearts—that they have drawn tears from the eyes of thousands in this city, albeit unused to the melting mood. Nor can it be doubted that time only is wanted to bring us similar instances of noble conduct.

One thing only is wanted to complete the social remuneration—and that is the substantial testimony of public sympathy—far the largest to be demanded—which is mentioned on page 12 of the Discourse.

How little should we know of the good feeling there is in the world, if it were not for calamity! Let the cynic and the misanthrope say what they will, the pestilence, the conflagration, the earthquake, and the storm, will provide us with an answer to them!